
H-France Review Vol. 12 (September 2012), No. 123

Susan J. Palmer, *The New Heretics of France: Minority Religions, la République, and the Government-Sponsored "War on Sects."* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xviii + 251 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$74.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-973521-1.

Review by John Warne Monroe, Iowa State University.

To North Americans, the French state's approach to religion often seems perplexing. Like the United States, France is a republic founded on Enlightenment-derived ideas of individual freedom that have come to place a particular importance on the separation of church and state. At the same time, however—as the followers of this list are well aware—the terms of that separation differ dramatically in the two countries. The distinctively French notion of *laïcité* is at the heart of this difference. While the word seems, at first, to be translatable as “secularism,” it has connotations that do not easily cross languages. Joan Scott, in her book on the *affaire des foulards*, explains this difference by drawing an incisive comparison: in American law, the separation of church and state is intended to protect religions from government interference; *laïcité*, in contrast, “means the separation of church and state through the state's protection of individuals from the claims of religion.”[1]

Rather than considering faith as the product of a free individual choice, as Americans tend to do, *laïcité* constructs faith and freedom as opposites. This view depends on a universalizing conception of rational autonomy that has become central to the French idea of republican citizenship. In his or her public capacity, according to this conception, a citizen must be able to exercise reason freely; faith, by imposing epistemological *a priori*s that might not be founded in empirical reality—the belief that mankind was created by extraterrestrials, for instance, or that the universe was created in seven days—inhibits the free exercise of reason conceived in these terms and therefore potentially limits a citizen's ability to function as an effective maker of political decisions.

In recent decades, French *laïcité* has taken on a surprising new shape. For most of the idea's history, to paraphrase Voltaire, the Catholic Church was the primary *infâme* to be *écrasée*. Now, however, the balance has shifted. Anti-clericalism remains alive and well, but legislative efforts to defend *laïcisme* have increasingly focused on minority religions—whether long-established, like Islam, or of recent invention, like Scientology. Opposition to religious incursions into public life, as a result, can seem perilously close to xenophobia or a desire to defend Catholicism against competing faiths. French religious policy debates, in turn, have become a *ménage* of strange bedfellows: when it comes to issues like the wearing of headscarves in schools or the regulation of small, “high-demand” religious groups, left-wing advocates of republican universalism and right-wing Catholic cultural nationalists frequently find themselves on the same side—a situation that breaks sharply from entrenched precedent, and that should therefore command our attention as historians of France. Clearly, a significant change is afoot.

Susan J. Palmer's useful book makes an important contribution to our understanding of this ongoing transformation in the nature of *laïcité* by adding a new piece to the puzzle: a detailed account of the French state's treatment of New Religious Movements (NRMs) during the last three decades. While she considers some developments that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, her story really begins with the aftermath of the ritual murder-suicides carried out by the *Ordre du Temple Solaire* in 1994–1995. These

shocking events created a new sense in the general public, the media, and among politicians that NRMs posed a social threat calling for decisive state intervention. Deputies of the National Assembly formed committees and drafted reports; Alain Juppé and Lionel Jospin created a succession of inter-ministerial task forces to address the perceived threats *sectes* posed. Most notably, 2001 saw the passage of the *loi About-Picard*, which drew on a dated and scientifically dubious conception of “brainwashing” to make a cult leader’s “mental manipulation” of his or her followers into a criminal offense. During this period, members of the 173 NRMs initially named in a 1996 National Assembly report were fired from their jobs, faced extra scrutiny from tax authorities, and often ended up on the losing ends of child custody agreements. Though anti-cult rhetoric has become less prevalent in the last several years—perhaps, as Palmer suggests, because attention has now shifted to Islam—the About-Picard law remains in force and the state continues to devote considerable resources to the surveillance of NRMs.

Palmer, a sociologist of religion, seeks to understand the ways in which these anti-cult policies have impacted the NRMs they attempt to regulate. She divides her analysis into three parts. In the first, she provides an informative thumbnail sketch of the development of the government-sponsored anti-cult movement from 1995 to the present. The second part, by far the longest, is a series of six chapter-length case studies, each devoted to a new religious movement that allows her to explore a different aspect of what she calls “the French sect wars.” Aumism, a small NRM headquartered in a complex of symbolically-designed buildings and monumental concrete sculptures called the Holy City of Mandarom, near the village of Castellane (*Alpes-de-Haute-Provence*), illustrates both the impact of negative media attention and the ways in which anti-cult sentiment has provoked government interference—in this case, when local authorities summarily dynamited a thirty-three-meter-tall statue of the “Cosmoplanetary Messiah” that the group erected on its land. The Church of Scientology’s aggressive response to legal efforts to limit its expansion in France, and its active role in seeking to bring together NRMs in a struggle against state regulation, provides Palmer with an opportunity to look more closely at a complex interaction between *laïcisme* and a group that conceives of itself in terms of “American standards of religious freedom” (p. 81). Palmer’s chapter on the Raélians, a Francophone UFO religion, describes the factors that led up to the group’s 2007 decision to “go underground,” rather than continue its existence in France; a widespread, media-fueled anxiety about the movement’s unconventional approach to sexuality played a crucial role in its downfall. Palmer uses the tumultuous story of the French branch of a small American group called the Twelve Tribes to discuss the role played by conceptions of child welfare and the importance of secular public education in government decisions to take legal action against *sectes*. The rise and fall of a New Age communal farm called Horus, whose leader practiced various forms of alternative healing, reveals the extent to which debates about the proper role of medicine in human life have played a role in shaping French anti-cult policy. In her final case-study, Palmer analyzes the first application of the About-Picard law, a 2004 case against an NRM leader named Arnaud Mussy, founder of the tiny Nantes-based group Néo-Phare.

The book’s concluding section is a broader consideration of *laïcité* and the complex motivations behind this dramatic surge in anti-cult sentiment. Here, unfortunately, Palmer’s approach, which is much more deeply grounded in the sociological literature than in the historical, shows its limitations. While her general observations about the idea of *laïcité* and its importance in contemporary France are sound, her account of the idea’s history, and of French history in general, tends to be imprecise, and in a few cases inaccurate. She calls Charles Fourier an “eighteenth-century thinker,” for instance, and implies that the Dreyfus Affair occurred *after* the premiership of Emile Combes (1902-1905) (pp. 101, 182). As the latter error indicates, her account of the political “war of religion” that shaped the early Third Republic—and established *laïcité* as a founding principle of the French state—is schematic and undeveloped.

In large part, the problem seems to come from her tendency to rely exclusively on broad, impressionistic historical analyses by sociologists; a few carefully-chosen works by historians, who have written a great deal on this question, might have added some useful additional precision. This

disciplinary blind-spot gives her broader conclusions a vagueness that weakens them somewhat. Rather than making explicit the way current anti-cult sentiment has grown from a series of historical conjunctures, drawing much of its force from its place in a highly-developed political and intellectual tradition, Palmer tends to portray it as an irrational prejudice. For supporters of *laïcisme*, however, the idea derives its power from the very sense of authoritative universal rationality that it seems to exude; that distinctive air of intellectual legitimacy is itself a consequence of the way the tension between religious commitment and public obligation was constructed over time in French republican discourse. A closer look at the historical scholarship, therefore, would make it possible to articulate—and critique—this point of view more convincingly.

These methodological shortcomings, however, do not seriously diminish the value of Palmer’s scholarly contribution. The existing literature on NRMs in France is quite sparse. Aside from her own important 2004 monograph on the Raélians and a precious few other books, non-biased sociological or ethnographic studies of individual heterodox religious groups in present-day France do not exist.[2] The most prolific and influential French-speaking writer on the topic has been the late Msgr. Jean Vernet, whose numerous books provide reasonably accurate summaries of the basic belief systems of various NRMs, but do so from the point of view of a Catholic apologist.[3] His accounts do not have the benefit of insights derived from participant-observation or extensive field interviews with active believers—an absence that much of the quantitative sociological literature on the topic in France shares.

This lack of “value-free” qualitative analysis is also typical of the numerous books on the subject produced by French anti-cult activists, which tend to rely exclusively on the testimony of former members and the distressed relatives of converts, while self-consciously avoiding any direct contact with the groups in question. French authorities have exacerbated this situation by tending to discount the well-developed field of Anglo-American new religious studies, dismissively assuming that “the scholars are probably contaminated ‘cult apologists’—and in any case, *sectes* are not to be taken seriously as ‘religions’” (p. 198). Indeed, as Palmer shows, some French scholars who have attempted to study NRMs in more detail have even faced reprisals in the form of police investigations and defamation suits from anti-cult activists (see, e.g., pp. 40, 209-211). Her book, therefore, offers much information unavailable elsewhere and deserves serious attention from anyone interested in contemporary French religious life.

NOTES

[1] Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 15.

[2] Susan J. Palmer, *Aliens Adored: Raël’s UFO Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004); see also, e.g., Christine Bergé, *La Voix des Esprits, Ethnologie du Spiritisme* (Paris: Métailié, 1990); and Maurice Duval, *Un Ethnologue à Mandarom, enquête à l’intérieur d’une secte* (Paris: PUF, 2002).

[3] Probably the most widely cited of his works is Jean Vernet, *Jésus dans la nouvelle religiosité* (Paris: Desclée, 1987).

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ISSN 1553-9172